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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 001377

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DHAHRAN SENDS
PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/05/2016
TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM KIRF SA
SUBJECT: SHI'A "INDEPENDENTS" DISCUSS NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR
CIVIL SOCIETY, OTHER ISSUES

Classified by Acting Consul General Dave Speidel for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) A group of Shi'a independents again stressed to ConOffs their community's national identity, desire for reform in the Kingdom, and lack of political ties to Iran. They noted that the SAG is allowing the Shi'a community to build an active but small-scale and unofficial civil society, centered in Qatif, and said that other Shi'a communities in the Kingdom are beginning to express their identities more publicly. They stressed the Saudi educational system as the area most in need of reform, gave examples of discrimination against the Shi'a in government hiring practices, expressed doubt about the efficacy of the Human Rights Commission to redress Shi'a grievances, and offered an interesting anecdote about the strategic thinking of President Ahmadinejad of Iran. End summary.

Shi'a Communities Take Advantage of New Openings

¶12. (C) CG, PolOff and PAO met on February 28 with a number of the Shi'a "independents" PolOff and PAO had met for the first time several weeks ago, including Hussein Al-Awami, Sheikh Abdullatif Al-Nasr, Naji Al-Nasser, Hesham Al-Quraish, Kathim Al-Shabeeb, and Ali Al-Marzouk (ref B). The conversation began with a discussion of the regular cultural and even political gatherings that are springing up in the Qatif area (ref A). Describing these gatherings as focal points for groups that verged on political parties, our interlocutors noted that there were at least eight such forums in the Qatif area. Although the SAG will not officially sanction these forums and indeed has asked the organizers of several of them to shut them down, it is tacitly permitting them. "It's better for the government to let us operate quietly in the open than to push us underground," noted Al-Quraish. "It has enough on its hands trying to uncover the terrorist organizations."

¶13. (C) Shi'a across the Kingdom are taking advantage of this greater breathing room, said Al-Nasr. As an example, he reported that the small Shi'a community in Medina had, for the first time this year, put out a public invitation to the community, through an Internet posting, to an indoor husseiniya gathering during Ashura. He also said that small, indigenous Shi'a communities in Nejd cities such as Hail and Riyadh are cautiously beginning to permit their

religious identities to be known. (Note: Some Shi'a hide their identity for self-protection, a practice known as "taqiyya." Al-Nasr's remark marks the second time we have heard that there may be indigenous Shi'a communities in the Nejd. End note.)

Discrimination and Suggestions for Reform

¶4. (C) Our interlocutors offered additional information on discrimination against Shi'a in Saudi government hiring practices. Although allowed to join the military, they said, Shi'a are effectively barred from any leadership role because they are not allowed to attend military academies and hence can never become officers. (Note: Al-Quraish added that the Saudi Navy allowed some Shi'a to attend its academy in the 1960s and 1970s, but stopped after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. End note.) Shi'a apply to the diplomatic corps, they also claimed, but the government will not accept them.

(Note: At a reception for first and second tour Mission officers and their Saudi MFA counterparts in Riyadh several weeks ago, a group of young Saudi diplomats studying at the MFA's training institute told PolOff that there no Qatifis amongst their colleagues. "They are from an oasis," one said in all seriousness. "I think they prefer farming and fishing." End note.)

¶5. (C) Asked if they thought either of the human rights organizations in the Kingdom would be good venues to seek redress of these types of discrimination, our interlocutors said no. "It is controlled by the government," Al-Nasr noted, referring to the government's Human Rights Commission (HRC). Al-Awami relayed a story of a merchant he knew in Al-Ahsa who was arrested and then given a minor sentence for

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not going to maghreb prayer. When he brought his case to the HRC, arguing that he, as a Shi'a, could legitimately combine the maghreb and asha prayers, he was ultimately told, according to Al-Awami, that the HRC could not help him because he was Shi'a.

¶6. (C) As in our past conversation, the group was intensely interested in steps the U.S. might be taking to push Saudi Arabia to reform politically and grant full rights to all its citizens. When asked what they would recommend the U.S. focus on in a reform dialogue with Saudi Arabia, one interlocutor responded that the educational system was the key. "The next generation of terrorists is being educated now," he said, arguing that curriculum reform efforts to date had produced only minor results. Al-Awami said that the government had recently issued a decree stating that all extremists would be expelled from the Ministry of Education. He said that he had called Khalil Al-Khalil, a Majlis Al-Shura member, to ask if the decree would actually be implemented. Al-Khalil, he said, responded with a belly laugh, "If they try to implement it they'll have to expel 75 percent of the Ministry."

Iranian Brinksmanship

¶7. (C) Finally, during a discussion about Iran (in which our interlocutors repeated the points reported in ref B), Al-Awami related an anecdote about President Ahmadinejad that the Afghan consul in Dubai, a friend of his, recently related to him. "My friend the consul said that he met Ahmadinejad at the OIC conference in Mecca. They knew each other as they had been friends from when they were students. My friend asked Ahmadinejad why he was taking so dangerous a course and risking confrontation with the United States. Ahmadinejad then talked about chess strategy for 15 minutes. When my friend asked him why he was responding to the question about the U.S. by talking about chess, Ahmadinejad said, 'If it

looks like we are about to be checkmated, we will change tactics.'"

(APPROVED: SPEIDEL)
OBERWETTER